

2_11_26 Talk*

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Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] Wanted to call out some qualities that were we kind of moved through in the meditation and They're worth reflecting on their place for you in your own life so one of those fundamental matters is paradoxically to Fortify ourselves so we can soften ourselves Sometimes we ask ourselves to just let go open up get in touch with things. And we're not ready to, we're non-sufficiently resourced. So it's important to get in touched with a sense of your ongoingness, of your all-rightness. And then on the basis of that, as well as the okayness, you know, the location you're in, so that, ah, you can afford to lower your guard. You can afford to bring in those guardians out there on the watchtowers of your mind and bring them inside and open the drawbridge, open the gates and allow and accept and receive whatever is there. In other words, stabilize yourself and resource yourself so you can afford to do that. That's an important general principle.

[00:01:16] It can be frightening sometimes, for example, as well to observe the disappearing-ness of every moment. Whoa! The sand is always slipping through our fingers. Whoa, that's true. But meanwhile, there is the endless arisingness of this moment enabled by the passing away of the last moment. And as we're more aware of the endless arisings, we can be more comfortable with and able to tolerate the endless endings as we deepen in our recognition of impermanence, for example. And then as we progressed We were exploring a softening in the body, a lowering of defenses, and that itself is really worth observing. What is it like to be undefended in the present, if only for half a second? And then can you extend that and extend the sense that that's okay? When it is, if you're under attack, no, shield's up. If it's okay in the present. What's it like to observe subtleties in your body of bracing, the armor that Wilhelm Reich and other people have pointed out we tend to develop. You know, we stiffen and armor ourselves, including, again, certain feelings. We can soften in the body, very fundamentally. And then we can allow our experience to flow. We're not craving or clinging aversion. The holding at bay or the pushing away. We're softening our aversion by really opening in the body and lowering our guard. When it's safe to do that and resourcing ourselves to be comfortable with that when it actually is safe to. That was in the meditation.

[00:03:10] And then as it progressed, I referred to the Buddha's instruction to steady the mind internally, to stabilize presence. Steadily present, which means a lot disengaging from trains of thought that would carry us away. You're present unless you're carried away. The default is presence. And yeah, I'm talking here Thanks for Chitra and Brenda for I'm calling out things we did in the meditation So as I called out that sense of stabilizing presence I added as well the Buddha's next instruction to quiet the mind steadying the mind Quieting yet The two other instructions that follow which we'll get to maybe down the road bring it to singleness, singleness and concentrated. But steadying and quieting are very fundamental and not that easy often to do. So it's good, it's an accomplishment if you're able to do that here, at least to some extent, if only even for flashes. So quieting, you may know that of the seven factors of awakening, tranquility is one of them. And this is not a suppressive tranquility. It's not a numbing, it's not an apathy. It's a peacefulness, it's a pacifying, it's a tranquilizing in a beautiful way. It's quieting.

[00:04:42] And then as the mind gradually quiets and in the progression that we did in the meditation, I'm calling out different aspects of it experientially. So you have experiences for the words I was using and you can kind of mark these as, Oh, these are. These are things to be aware of. These are qualities worth developing, which will be very useful for my

primary focus tonight in my talk. Increasingly then, as the mind gets quieter, we're more aware of the space of it. Much as, you know, as a very muddy pond, let's say, has the sediments increasingly settle, we're aware of more of the volume of the water in the pond. Similarly, as sediments in your mind settle, you become more aware the volume of the mic. The vast, the spaciousness of it, the openness of it. Can occur, and that's helpful, to have an increasingly quiet mind where you're abiding essentially as mind as a whole, you're biting increasingly as awareness, because there's less and less noise and clutter in it.

[00:05:51] And then I called out, and this is an important thing to be aware of, a shift of identity. Who are you? Are you the voice in the back of the head? Are you the muttering and murmuring in the ruminator? Do, do, do. Okay, we are those things sometimes. And what can be available is that identity can start to actually shift 10. Literally can be authentic to say to yourself, I am this spaciousness. I am spacious presence with love arising. And that sense of identity that that's real is something to kind of claim and increasingly settle into because the end and then increasingly carry with you as you go through the day, you know, maybe at the surface level, you know, I am the senior vice president of this or that, you know, so I'm a licensed clinical psychologist. OK, there's a place for that. But maybe underneath that, there can be the growing trait of a sense of identity as, you know, spacious, loving presence as who you. Deeply are, through which various flotsam and jetsam, you know, roll along in this stream of consciousness. Shift of identity, all right, and then in that shift of identity, then I finished with, you know, a quality of love, lovingness, you know love by many names, compassion, friendliness, goodwill, you know an inherent quality of lovingness. Can be encouraged and to some extent seems to naturally arise in that sense of spacious presence.

[00:07:50] And there's a place for deliberately naming heartfulness. Sometimes Buddhist practice can seem fixated on equanimity and renunciation, dispassion, disenchantment. You know, okay, it can seem kind of dry and heady and you know, I don't know. And what about love? What about being saturated with loving kindness and good wishes? In a way that's kind of juicy too. It's a place for that. So deliberately calling that out is useful, especially if you're like me at all, who through both gender socialization and the circumstances of my upbringing and schooling really was not very in touch with lovingness. Partly lovingness opened me up to a lot of vulnerabilities with my parents and somewhat mistakenly, but as a six-year-old might do. I kind of shut all that down to protect myself and to punish my parents too, especially my mom. And I regret all that, but oh well, kids, six year olds, 16 year olds and so on. But still, it's been a journey for me to open the heart. And so I think there's a place for calling that out for many of us, deliberately.

[00:09:14] Okay, so I wanted just to quickly review the meditation. That's what I did there. So far. And now I'd like to move into a topic that I'm actually really excited about. And it's built on the exploration last week of the classic teaching about the so-called heavenly messengers. Very quick recap. There's a probably mythic story in which the Buddha, as you know, a person raised in a fair amount of privilege, most likely, as best we know. The historical accounts are pretty fuzzy, but it's pretty clear that he lived in Northern India around 2,500 years ago, came from a, in effect, fairly well-to-do farming family. And at a relatively young age, faced with the imminent arrival of his first child, just left and entered into seven years or so of intense spiritual practice. Now we could judge his leaving from the perspective of, you know, 2026. Okay, that's complicated. He did leave. And as one of the stories goes, the leaving in part was related to not being exposed to the harsher realities of life until one day he kind of stepped outside the palace or whatever and

encountered someone who was aging, someone who is ill, and someone who's dead. As well as someone who embodied deep spiritual practice.

[00:10:50] And these are the so-called four heavenly messengers. They may be coming from heaven, but they sure are amongst us here on planet Earth. Who among us has not been aware of aging, disease, and death, as well the opportunity for practice, including practice that goes all the way to full awakening? They're among us. And it's important to hear their messages. I don't know about you, but wow, lately in particular, I've been really aware of a number of friends and others who are getting ill, sometimes terminally, or grappling with a tough condition, or hear that someone I'd known, you know, has passed away. Whoa, you now, I too am not immune to the call of the three of the messengers. I try to heed the fourth too, the one of practice. It's real, so that's very real.

[00:11:47] And so I spoke about that. And I'd like to build on that to really talk about something that is fundamental to the three messengers of aging, illness, and death, which is vulnerability. Implicitly, we explored vulnerability during the meditation around softening and lowering our guard, lowering our defenses. And that often surfaces a sense of vulnerability. So to be able to tolerate that sense of vulnerability, it's very useful, as I've said, to kind of shore up your sense of all rightness in the present, as well as other things like a sense of your own strength, your durability, your moxie, your determination, and your fortitude and so forth. So vulnerability, we are vulnerable.

[00:12:42] One example of that vulnerability is to appreciate that we have a body. Over 100 trillion cells and amongst those cells are probably estimated, you know, tenfold like a quadrillion or more microorganisms. Most of them neutral, some of them benign, some of the harmful living with us. And we're an ongoing process. Most of the atoms in our body are replaced every within every seven years or so. And many of them, a large majority, a larger fraction. Think of the water. That comprises what, 70 or so percent of our bodies, you know, hydrogen and oxygen atoms being replaced fairly routinely. And in that sense of us being processes, transacting with the world, we are completely dependent on the food we eat, on the sun that enables the plants to enable all the foods we eat. We're vulnerable to the oxygen that's being produced by green-growing things. We're dependent on all that. We're depending on so many circumstances and factors. Other people, healthcare. I don't know about you, but I'm old enough that I think that if, you know, I'm not sure I'd be here were it not for several kinds of modern medicine over the course of my lifetime. We're dependant.

[00:14:10] One of the Buddha's arguably most fundamental teachings. Is what's called fancily dependent origination that just about everything except that which is unconditioned arises and passes away due to causes and conditions it depends on those causes and conditions for its existence and when those causes in conditions and so does its existence. It's quite visceral, it's really quite visceral to be in touch with this. It takes us in to a fundamental sense of vulnerability. Those causes and conditions could end. Maybe slowly, hopefully after a long, wonderful, healthy life, a peaceful fade out, the lights gradually go out. Sometimes, like that, something happens. I try to be prepared, really, for the lights to go out at any moment. Because in some cases, they do. I don't say this to alarm you. I just say this, to state what we all already know. And if we open to it... It brings up feelings of vulnerability. So how do we practice with vulnerability? How do we practice with our inherent dependencies?

[00:15:41] The foundation of practicing with them is to acknowledge them. Including our dependencies on others, our need for social supplies, for care and support from others

and how it impacts us when we don't get them. And therefore the importance of looking for realistic ways to get the supplies you need from other people. What does your body really need to have a good long health span? And can you face what it needs? Can you realize as I am belatedly that things like exercise are really important? Recognizing our dependency and not being dishonest about it is really foundational. And then there's a deepening of this that some people talk about as the primal wound. And so here we are as adults, most of us, I think, maybe probably all of us are 18 or older, and we get it, okay, dependency. And most of it's pretty competent, pretty careful. I mean, here you are, 481 of you, in addition to me, and pretty set up. You know, if something happens, you're probably pretty able to take care of it. But how about going all the way back? The day you were born. Where I was born, the first year of life. We are so vulnerable. So vulnerable.

[00:17:26] You know, if you've spent time with human infants and we were all once a human infant, it's shocking how completely incapable they are of taking care of themselves. One of the major factors in the development of our big human brain was extending childhood to allow the physical maturation of them. Human brain. An adult chimpanzee's brain is about twice the size of a newborn chimpanzees. An adult human's brain that's four times the size of an infant brain. And to enable that quadrupling in volume, in size, childhood had to really extend. And unlike baby chimpanzees who can hold on to their mamas, human infants have to be carried around. Very vulnerable. So here we were, right? What were they Thank you. You know, conceiving us, inflicting consciousness on unsuspecting flesh. There we were. And come out into the world and you might just reflect for a moment. Don't go down any rabbit holes that are traumatic for you, but just reflect on the realities of what you were born into. Even really well-intended parents, you know, a lot of young parents, first parents, are ill-equipped. Maybe they haven't spent a lot time with infants, because we increasingly don't have a culture in which most people are routinely doing that, unlike in hunter-gatherer bands. Maybe there were issues in the couple. Maybe the pregnancy wasn't so wanted initially. Maybe there was structural factors, systemic factors.

[00:19:05] One of the Worst factors for infant mental health is poverty of the parents due to systemic sources, structural sources, generational poverty, for example. We come out into the world and even with highly attuned, highly careful parents, and I have a lot of background in the zero to three age range, no parenting is perfect. None of us experienced perfect caregiving. And that lands on us. Even the moment, even the process of delivery, right? Coming out of what, for most of us probably, was a fairly protected, kind of warm, dark, quiet place. Suddenly, what? It's loud, it's bright. Strange things are happening. Whoa! William James called it a buzzing, blooming confusion. Like, whoa, it is shocking. And in all that, what are we forced into feeling? Propelled into feeling intensely vulnerability. Depending on the circumstances, including particularly certain aspects of helplessness and feeling like you can't make good things happen and a related sense often of somehow not being worth. Not being worth feeding, not being worth pain being relieved. And we end up with a primal wound. Universally. That's inherent in our mammalian nature of live birth. And probably true for, you know, creatures crawling out of eggs. What? You know, little chickens or fish or insects. But in any case, for us, boom.

[00:21:14] And I invite you to be aware of and to kind of reflect on that primal wound in you and its consequences in your in your own life and how to practice with it. And I'm not gonna get into primal screaming here and that sort of thing. I'm just naming something that with mindful insight, you can become more and more aware of and can become increasingly released.

[00:21:43] So I wanna name some of the ways in which that kind of primal wound can manifest. I'll just be quite candid about myself because this has been a very provocative exploration from you personally recently to get in touch with a very young sense of helplessness and therefore a related belief in being helpless, which then people compensate for.

[00:22:15] So one of the ways we manage the primal wound or aspects of it is to compensate for it by, in my case, really focusing on agency. Not being helpless, you know, always trying to figure something out and, but not always usefully. You know, I'm talking about the compensation aspects, the going overboard aspects to compensate for an experience of, let's say, relative helplessness. So you might explore that in yourself, versions of over control, compulsivity. Obsessiveness, perfectionism. Criticism of things going wrong? And explore the ways in which those are somehow compensatory for an underlying very scary feeling of vulnerable helplessness. Compensatory. Another one for me was a sense that somehow I wasn't worth my parents' full attention. They had a lot going on, including they were pregnant with my sister four months after I was born. What were they thinking? And my dad was getting, you know, Thank you guys. Final training as a zoologist and all the rest of that. My mom didn't have family nearby. It was tough. So I didn't, you know, I think there were some very young experiences. I was fed on a schedule that I didn't matter enough somehow.

[00:23:55] So you might see whatever's true for you about that. It's okay to see it. And then ask yourself, if so, how have you tried to compensate for it? You know, maybe by, you know, really wanting to make sure that you achieve things in this life, you accomplish things, you build up, you, know, social supplies, you get them for you, you add to your banners, you prove that indeed you are worth care and attention, you are worth mattering to others. Think of the strategies that get wrapped around that, and see potentially if you can trace some of that back all the way to those very, very young experiences, right? And I'm calling out two in particular, helplessness and feeling unworthy. Now, to an infant, the beliefs for this are not highly cognitively developed and language doesn't come in till the first birthday or typically even later, but there can be a fundamental sense of this. Think about compensatory strategies that become forms of craving and clinging in the second noble truth of the Buddha that then lead to suffering for yourself and harms to others. I will be working my way to what to do about them, but I want to cover one more thing.

[00:25:28] In addition to the compensatory aspects of this, we're trying to compensate for a sense of or a belief that there could well be some very young material that's very emotional of sort of disappointment, like a primal slump or... Anger. You know, when a child, when an infant is crying and fussing and wants, it's mad often. It's not just upset and teary. It's angry, like protest, you know, outrage, right? So we can have qualities perhaps of disappointment. We can have qualities of anger. There might be other kind of transferred to and projected onto the world that turbocharge our reactions to it. So you think sometimes maybe at certain situations in which when you rewind it and looked at it you're like, oh, I was over the top there. Something grabbed me. Something, you know, captured me and reactivated me. Maybe, maybe you can trace with your mindful insight. Some of that reactivation and projection and transference and turbocharging into the present going all the way back to some very young emotions rooted in this primal wound. Primal wounding is a process. Worth looking at. The point of all this is not like Woody Allen to make a new movie about your neurosis or to write a master's thesis about it is to become free of it.

[00:27:26] And that's what I like to explore now, including some helpfulness from the Buddhist tradition in terms of practicing with and addressing the impacts of this primal wounding. To the extent that you relate to it. So. Here we are, vulnerable, really young. And you can apply this to experiences in childhood, even in adulthood that happen later on, but it's very conspicuous in the first days, months, and year or so of life. Vulnerability, one major thing we can do in our practice and aided by practice, empowered and strengthened by our practice, is to accept... Our vulnerability. And even except if you kind of go back in time, you can do this, except with compassion and a kind of sweetness, even for your young, really young self. The inherent vulnerability of being born into this life, you're born vulnerable. You know, Master Yun Min was asked, what is it that trees wither and leaves fall? He said, body exposed. Body exposed in the golden wind. You know, we're born exposed. To be exposed is to be vulnerable. And we can clench around that vulnerability, or as we can do with the heavenly messengers, we can invite them in. We can welcome. The sense of vulnerability.

[00:29:14] And you can even almost imagine retroactively going back into and down into deep layers inside your psyche. And imagine being a guide to or a friend to that really young layer of yourself still inside. Letting it know that it's okay to be vulnerable. There's no escape from vulnerability. You might as well allow it, receive it, open into it. That's a real practice these days. Can you stay on my topic here? Because we swerve away from vulnerability. We don't want to feel it. We swerved away from it in other people. Can you allow and accept your own dependent arising? You know, your own vulnerability. That's a very deep practice. And yet it's peaceful as soon as you admit, yeah, I am vulnerable. Yeah, I do depend on you to be kind to me and when you're not, it really hurts. My body is frail. I live in precarity. The older you get, the more precarious things are. More systems start to break down. The solutions to those breakdowns gradually become new problems that cause additional breakdowns. It's precarious, it's rickety. And you accept the rickety-ness of your own body, it's vulnerability. The peacefulness in that, just, I surrender. Yeah, I'm vulnerable. This body is rickety.

[00:31:12] And then in addition to that quality of acceptance and not, you know, non aversion to vulnerability as a as a practice over time, there's the even deeper question or deeper truth, deeper invitation. The fourth heavenly messenger to be aware of what is not vulnerable. Not. Stainable. Destructible. The ongoing-ness of being until the body dies, right? The ongoingness of awareness, the kind of fundamental core of who you are, even in the underlying-ness of those early infantile emotional residues in your own being, in your own body, even deep, even underneath them, can be a sense of just ongoing-ness. The universe ongoing. Life ongoing and the unconditioned ground of all ongoing as well.

[00:32:19] So it's really, you know, an invitation. You know, that was the fundamental invitation on the Buddha's own journey to find that which was unconditioned. He kept finding in his practice and his own story as reported in the surviving written teachings, more and more sublime states of being, and yet they too were vulnerable to passing away because they were caused by his and is meditative. Tricks and techniques and all the rest of that and because they were caused they were vulnerable to passing away and eventually found that which is unconditioned, uncaused and therefore not subject to arising and passing away, and therefore timeless. Always present, always available here and now. Can enable us to even more deeply relax around our vulnerabilities. You know, the body is vulnerable. It will arise and pass away. And there is that which is not subject to arising and passing away. And we can become increasingly aware of it, identified with it, and rested in it.

[00:33:33] Finishing up here, this is kind of a postscript, I paused. That's what I had to say, that's what had to offer. And what comes on the heels of that, I was just reflecting and feeling that given how vulnerable we are, given that, as Dylan put it, Bob Dylan, one who is not busy being born is busy dying. We are all busy dying. Given that fact, wow, good on you for practicing, good on for squeezing the juice out of the orange along the way, right? Given how precarious life is, given our frailties. How honorable, how wonderfully honorable and virtuous and worthy, how creditable that you and I and others are still engaged with life. And don't just give up and wither away. You know, it's because we're so vulnerable. Our efforts are so honorable.

[00:34:44] Let's see, what is so bad about dying? Catherine asks, well, different answers to that. I would say that the body doesn't want to die. And I think there are people, and I was with a friend of mine recently who chose her own end, who are just tired of this life. And that triple net, the pains are starting to really outweigh the pleasures and they're ready to go. And for her, dying was a blessing and a boon and a grace. And not bad at all. On the other hand, until you're ready, you might wanna stick around a little longer.

[00:35:20] Great question. So Claire asked 21 minutes past the hour, do I have any suggestions about examining early experience when you don't have good memories of it? Well, for one, most people have zero memories or recollections of childhood before age three. And yet, lived experience lays down tracks. The title of the book from Bessel van der Kolk about trauma, but it's true in general, the body keeps the score. So, and there are ways to intuit or sense down into those residues of lived experience, even going all the way back. And I think it's important to not err on the side of really fabricating, you know, stuff about yourself, you know on the one hand, on the other hand, intuitively you can often have a sense, particularly if you're pretty self-aware and kind of stably self-aware. You can kind of reach down almost into, or sense down into, deep layers and open to maybe imagery that might arise or very young, experiential layers that have the ring of truth to you. And it sometimes is very helpful to gather information as you can about your early childhood.

[00:36:39] When I learned that I was fed on a schedule, thank you, Dr. Spock, when I was an infant, That explained a lot of things. And interestingly, I actually had a conversation with my mom as an adult in which she said, yeah, Rick, we fed you on a schedule, like Dr. Spock said, but you cried all the time. So we finally threw the book away and just fed you whenever you wanted. And I thought, what, crying all the time and thanks, mom, I appreciate it. Good for you. You came through for me. Thank you, right? But that rang really true for me around some early kind of sense deep down inside myself. It's not perfect. You know, I think. Techniques like hypnotic regression can be helpful if you're kind of watchful for the distinction between fabricating and discovering. You know, and we can see this with our own children.

[00:37:31] And I think there's a whole piece of work, I'm seeing Brenda's comment there as well, where we look at forgiveness for ourselves and we look out owning our mistakes and feeling the first darts of our grief about them. While disengaging from the second darts of ruminating about our mistakes, lashing ourselves, endlessly criticizing ourselves, and swerving away from the opportunity at some point to having taken responsibility, turn a corner, in which we're no longer lambasting ourselves and getting sucked into that, and that we can move toward a kind of absolution. I think it's a very beautiful, deep experience. Which is only available, really, when we've taken full responsibility for the mistakes we made.

[00:38:27] Finishing up. I appreciate what you're saying, Sarah, Sarah. About this being an important topic. It really is. And I do hope to come back to it. And this notion of the primal wound, I think is vulnerable. That topic is vulnerable to a kind of glamorizing or oh, shock material, you know, catastrophizing or, you know I just really invite us all into the simplicity. And the common humanity. Arriving as a little infant, helpless. Basically, you can maybe latch on. And suck. That's about all you know how to do, pretty much. And then you need to learn from there and you're so dependent on caregiving. And it is hard to be 99% attuned. No one is 100% attune to an infant. It's really hard to be 99. And, you know, kind of a typical standard is, I don't know. A typical norm, not standard. It's probably closer to 90% perfectly attuned. And so I think that's important also to bring to bear in how we regard our own parents. Yes, there's a place for discerning clearly, parenting that we got that was just catastrophically terrible, if that were the case, of various kinds or caregiving of various kind. And on the other hand, when we recognize our common humanity, the universality.

[00:40:09] Of these primal woundings, primal experiences, inevitable experiences of helplessness and not mattering enough. We can, you know, look at our parents sometimes with a wider perspective and consider the kind of, you know experiences they had in their own first year of life. So maybe we will explore this again.

[00:40:38] So I invite you to consider this. And key takeaways are to open to what is true for you about your own childhood, more broadly to just explore allowing vulnerability and even what might be valuable for you in welcoming vulnerability and exploring what it's like and showing yourself up so that you can then lower your guard and be vulnerable with other people and in this life. Vulnerable self-expression, being real with people, lowering your defenses, opening the doors to your heart, allowing people in. These are forms of vulnerability in the real. And that's worth exploring. And it's also worth exploring that which is deeper than vulnerability. That which is not subject to arising and passing away.